

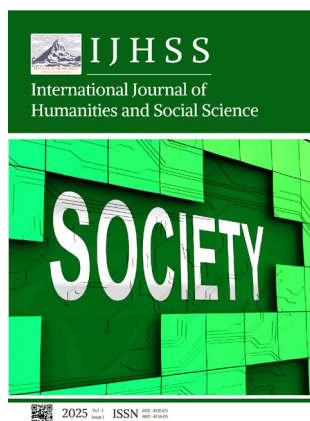
Article

Research on Development Strategies for Social Work in the Context of Social Management System Reform

Jiachen Liu ^{1,*}

¹ Hong Kong University Business school, Hong Kong, China

* Correspondence: Jiachen Liu, Hong Kong University Business school, Hong Kong, China



Abstract: At present, China is at a critical juncture in the deepening transformation of its social management system, as the traditionally administration-dominated model gradually shifts toward a multi-stakeholder collaborative governance approach. This profound transformation offers significant opportunities for the development of social work, while also posing unprecedented challenges. Social work is increasingly expected to address complex social needs and contribute to improving the efficiency of public services. However, in practice, the pace of professional service development has not yet fully aligned with ongoing institutional reforms, and the tension between resource constraints and the demand for improved efficiency persists. It has therefore become increasingly urgent to explore a development model for social work that is closely linked to the reform agenda, applicable to China's specific context, and capable of supporting the modernization of social governance.

Keywords: social management system; social work; development approach

Received: 02 October 2025

Revised: 07 October 2025

Accepted: 20 October 2025

Published: 29 October 2025



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1. Introduction

The ongoing reform of social management systems in China is reshaping both the supply structure and service models of social services, while simultaneously opening institutional pathways for the involvement of professional social work in social governance. The primary aim of this reform is to recalibrate the relationship between government, market, and society, with a particular focus on decentralizing governance and enhancing the quality and accessibility of public services. This objective aligns closely with the core values of social work, particularly the foundational principle of "helping people to help themselves," which emphasizes empowerment, autonomy, and participatory engagement in addressing social needs.

However, the practical environment in which social work operates presents a complex interplay of opportunities and challenges. On one hand, reforms provide avenues for professional social workers to expand their influence and actively contribute to social governance. On the other hand, they face challenges related to professional identity, as the process of integrating into new institutional frameworks can limit autonomy and constrain the ability to exercise professional judgment. Social workers must navigate these tensions while negotiating their roles within evolving governance structures, balancing the expectations of institutional compliance with the ethical imperatives of the profession.

To effectively envision and develop future strategies for social work services, it is essential to critically examine the theoretical foundations of the field, understand the current stage of professional development, and analyze practical experiences in the context

of ongoing institutional reforms. Such an approach enables the identification of pathways for enhancing professional capacity, improving service delivery, and fostering a more participatory and responsive social governance model that reflects both the values of social work and the practical realities of reform implementation. Furthermore, understanding these dynamics is crucial for designing professional training, policy interventions, and organizational mechanisms that can support sustainable development and the modernization of social governance in China.

2. The Theoretical Foundation of Social Work in the Context of Social Management System Reform

2.1. The Fundamental Principles of Social Management System Reform

The fundamental principles of social management system reform are rooted in a comprehensive restructuring of China's social governance framework, with the core objective of redefining government functions and enhancing the dynamism and participation of diverse social actors. Traditional administrative command-driven management approaches have proven insufficient to address increasingly complex social issues, such as services for migrant populations, community integration, and pressures associated with an aging society. Consequently, shifting governance focus toward the grassroots level has become both a practical necessity and a strategic choice.

The reform aims to establish a governance framework characterized by "Party committee leadership, government responsibility, social coordination, and public participation." Within this model, the government transitions from an all-encompassing administrative role to one focused on guidance, coordination, and service oversight. At the community level, this transformation is evident in sub-district offices shifting from direct administrative management to acting as connectors of social resources, thereby creating institutional space for professional social organizations and social work to demonstrate their capabilities.

Professional social workers now have institutionalized channels to participate in governance, with their value manifested in translating broad policy objectives into concrete community services. They achieve this through methods such as case management, community mobilization, and service coordination [1]. By adhering to the inherent principles of modernized social governance, the reform not only maintains social order and stability but also unlocks community potential and social vitality. In doing so, it provides structural conditions conducive to the active engagement of professional forces in delivering public services, strengthening the integration of social work into formal governance mechanisms.

2.2. Special Requirements for Social Work in Social Management System Reform

The reform of the social management system imposes new and specialized requirements on social work, extending beyond the scope of traditional case-oriented services. Social work is expected to evolve from providing individual or family-level assistance to participating actively in the construction and operation of grassroots governance frameworks. This entails creating effective linkages between professional services and the administrative structures of street and community organizations.

In practical community work, social workers must develop a nuanced understanding of policy intentions, balancing the dual objectives of providing assistance and promoting resident autonomy. For instance, in the renovation of old residential areas, social workers are not only tasked with resolving conflicts and disputes but also with cultivating residents' capacity for dialogue, collective decision-making, and community engagement. Consequently, professional service methods require significant upgrading: mastering psychological counseling alone is insufficient to meet the demands of complex community challenges.

Modern social work practice demands comprehensive skill sets, including resource linkage, project planning, multi-party coordination, and strategic problem-solving. Social workers are expected to creatively integrate dispersed community resources, construct informal support networks, and fill gaps left by conventional public services, particularly in areas such as migrant population support and community elderly care. Through these efforts, social work demonstrates its professional value by implementing policy objectives, activating community potential, and fostering sustainable social governance practices that align with the reform agenda.

3. Challenges in Social Work Development Amid Social Management System Reform

3.1. Insufficient Integration Between System Reform and Professional Development

As social management systems continue to undergo reform, the integration of professional social work within administrative structures has not yet reached an optimal state. In grassroots communities, administrative functions and professional services are often intertwined, requiring community workers to simultaneously fulfill policy assessment indicators and deliver professional services. The rigidity of administrative procedures can at times hinder the flexibility required for interventions unique to social work.

Tensions frequently arise between standardized management processes and individualized programs, such as community correction initiatives. Professional interventions are often constrained to follow existing assessment mechanisms and documentation norms, including case management and group work protocols. This creates structural friction, limiting social work's ability to fully leverage its professional strengths. Addressing these challenges necessitates exploring practical pathways that comply with administrative requirements while preserving the core values and ethical standards of social work.

3.2. Room for Improvement in Service Effectiveness and Sustainability

Sustaining effective social work services in grassroots practice remains a significant challenge. Many community service programs rely on temporary project-based funding. When funding cycles conclude or subsequent support is delayed, the continuity of service relationships and established work practices is often compromised. Cultural and recreational programs for community elders, or advocacy initiatives for youth, may initially generate enthusiasm among volunteers, but engagement frequently diminishes over time, highlighting the need for service designs that better reflect residents' ongoing needs.

Unstable and non-professionalized resource provision tends to limit service content to the level of discrete activities, making it difficult to establish long-term mechanisms for improving residents' quality of life. Consequently, it is critical to consider how temporary service initiatives can be structured as endogenous development levers within communities at the project planning stage [2].

3.3. Significant Resource Investment and Operational Costs

Resource allocation in social work is characterized by structural constraints, with personnel salaries and operational expenses representing major cost pressures. Social work organizations often face the challenge of balancing competitive compensation for professional staff with the costs of comprehensive service delivery. Limited financial resources frequently prioritize immediate service activities over long-term human capital investment.

Community service sites incur fixed costs, such as rent, facility maintenance, and equipment, which compete with available funds for expanding service capacity. Additionally, inefficient resource utilization, including uncoordinated project arrangements across departments, can result in duplicate investments or gaps in service coverage. Without diversified and sustained resource support, the deepening development of social work remains constrained.

3.4. Conflict Between Policy Implementation and Professional Autonomy

A significant tension exists between standardized policy requirements and the professional autonomy of social work. Uniform service norms promoted by administrative systems often struggle to accommodate the unique characteristics and complex needs of diverse communities. For example, employment assistance programs for people with disabilities may rely on standardized indicators, such as employment rates, which fail to capture individual abilities or developmental differences.

Social workers must balance adherence to policy frameworks with the flexibility to tailor interventions to the specific circumstances of service recipients. However, administrative assessments often emphasize quantitative indicators, such as service coverage, over qualitative outcomes. This can necessitate compromises in professional judgment, particularly for family or long-term cases, where personalized, sustained interventions are critical. Finding a balance between meeting policy objectives and maintaining professional ethics remains a central practical challenge for social work practitioners.

3.5. Incomplete Talent Cultivation and System Framework

The current system for training social work professionals exhibits structural deficiencies and lacks alignment with the practical needs of social governance. University curricula emphasize theoretical knowledge, leaving graduates underprepared for the complexities of grassroots community work. Limited access to practice platforms and supervisory resources further constrains the translation of theory into effective interventions, particularly in conflict-laden situations involving multiple stakeholders.

The absence of clear career pathways, coupled with non-competitive salaries and benefits, has contributed to talent attrition, with practitioners often transitioning to related fields that offer better development prospects. Strengthening the connection between talent supply and practical demand is essential to establish a more substantive role for social work in grassroots governance and ensure sustainable professional development [3].

4. Development Approaches and Innovation Strategies for Social Work in the Context of Social Management System Reform

4.1. Policy Integration and Cross-Departmental Collaboration Mechanisms

The advancement of social work practice depends on policymakers' commitment to supporting cross-cutting measures that facilitate effective policy integration and interdepartmental collaboration. At the community level, a cross-departmental joint conference system can be established, convened regularly by departments such as civil affairs, human resources and social security, and education, to negotiate solutions to complex governance issues.

Community social work service stations should actively mobilize resources from local businesses, schools, and medical institutions to implement specific projects and develop comprehensive assistance plans for vulnerable populations. An interdepartmental information-sharing platform can help break down data silos across departments, enabling social workers to gain an accurate understanding of residents' needs and available resources. In government service procurement, professional social work organizations must cultivate expertise in the policy requirements of each department, integrating disparate administrative resources into a coherent service chain. Ultimately, this collaboration model allows departments to maintain functional independence while working collectively to deliver public services, with social work serving as the bridge between government and community.

4.2. Community-Based and Participatory Approaches

Community-based social work requires active resident participation to be a core component of service design, permeating all stages of community governance. Social workers should assist residents in establishing multi-level discussion and negotiation platforms.

For example, during the renovation of old residential areas, negotiation meetings for building supervisors and discussion sessions for resident representatives allow people of different age groups to participate in formulating public space renovation plans.

Social work teams should identify and nurture capable individuals within the community, such as retired teachers, engaged parents, and local volunteers, to form specialized service teams providing neighborhood care and after-school programs. Community service stations can hold regular open days, inviting residents to evaluate existing service projects and incorporate feedback into subsequent work plans. Professional social workers should gradually shift from being direct service providers to capacity builders, supporting residents in spontaneously organizing cultural, sports, and mutual aid activities. Decision-making for community affairs should reserve sufficient space for resident participation in matters such as parking management, environmental improvement, and waste classification. These participatory methods respect residents' central role in governance while cultivating the community's capacity for self-management, creating a sustainable and mutually reinforcing relationship between professional services and local autonomous practices [4].

4.3. Application of Information and Intelligent Technologies

The use of information and intelligent technologies in social work, if carefully planned, can enhance service efficiency without replacing professional judgment. For example, social media platforms such as WeChat groups and official accounts can notify residents of upcoming events and collect community needs. Social work teams can provide elderly residents living alone with smart call devices connected to emergency contacts in their families and local service stations.

Community service stations should maintain electronic service ledgers that systematically record residents' basic information and assistance needs, particularly for vulnerable groups. Simple data analysis tools can help social workers identify service gaps and anticipate needs, such as predicting elderly care demand. Technical support teams can develop basic applications to facilitate real-time updating of service-user records and monitoring service progress. The use of technology should be moderate and assistive, complementing rather than replacing professional expertise, allowing social workers to differentiate service-user needs and tailor interventions accordingly.

4.4. Innovation in Professionalization and Localization

Social work practice should be deeply rooted in the cultural environment of the community, integrating professional methods with local wisdom. Professional teams should combine standardized case management processes with traditional neighborhood mutual assistance practices to enhance service acceptability while maintaining professional standards.

Community workers can utilize familiar public spaces, such as tea houses and activity rooms, to deliver professional services, transforming social work concepts into tangible, everyday experiences for residents. Service agencies should establish systematic local case accumulation mechanisms to refine successful practices and integrate new residents into standard work procedures. Talent cultivation should emphasize recruiting experienced community workers familiar with local conditions, whose practical experience enables professional theories to adapt effectively to community realities.

This development path requires respecting existing community relationship networks and operational logic while upholding professional values, ensuring services meet regulatory requirements and address the specific needs of different communities. Professional teams should regularly conduct localized discussions, analyze special cases encountered during service delivery, and continuously optimize methods. Community ser-

vice stations can implement two-way communication mechanisms to disseminate professional concepts to residents while incorporating local knowledge, fostering a positive, interactive learning organizational culture [5].

4.5. Sustainable Development and Evaluation Mechanisms

Establishing a sustainable development mechanism for social work requires systematic resource guarantees and a scientific evaluation system. Social work institutions should diversify resource channels by combining stable government procurement with corporate social responsibility initiatives, community public welfare funds, and charitable trusts.

Government departments should maintain dynamic management databases to track project implementation, resource utilization, and long-term outcomes. Third-party evaluation teams can design multi-dimensional evaluation indices, including service coverage, resident participation, and improvements in quality of life, to avoid bias from single quantitative indicators. Community service stations should collect resident feedback through interviews and satisfaction surveys, using this information to optimize service plans.

Project teams must focus on transforming service outcomes into standardized procedures, solidifying effective practices such as case management and community integration. Resource supporters should establish scientific cost-benefit analysis frameworks to ensure optimal allocation while maintaining service quality and long-term social benefits. This comprehensive system emphasizes not only immediate service output but also lasting impacts, promoting the transformation of social work from short-term, project-based operations to long-term, institutionalized community development.

5. Implementation Pathways and Development Recommendations

Shaping the future trajectory of social work requires a multifaceted approach involving institutional, organizational, and community-level interventions. Government departments need to advance institutional arrangements that recognize professional social work services as part of regular public financial budgets. By formally including social work projects in budgetary allocations, governments can ensure stable funding and institutional support, thereby creating a reliable foundation for long-term professional service delivery.

Social work units should focus on building diversified resource networks that integrate corporate social responsibility investments with community public welfare funds, establishing a sustainable and stable supply of services. Such networks not only enhance resource availability but also create opportunities for innovative service design and project implementation tailored to local community needs.

At the community practice level, a tiered supervision and support model is essential. Experienced practitioners can serve as mentors to guide new social workers, helping them navigate complex community contexts and develop professional competencies. This mentorship system enhances practical skill acquisition, promotes knowledge transfer, and strengthens the overall capacity of social work teams to address multifaceted social issues effectively.

Expanding career development pathways is another critical component. Organizations should establish clear promotion ladders and competitive industry-based pay scales, ensuring systemic stability and incentivizing talent retention. A well-defined career structure motivates practitioners to invest in professional growth and contributes to sustaining a high-quality workforce [6].

Higher education institutions also play a pivotal role in this developmental ecosystem. Universities should strengthen collaboration with community service stations, providing students with practical opportunities to master core competencies, such as needs assessment, project design, and service implementation. Embedding practical experience within academic curricula ensures that graduates enter the workforce equipped

with both theoretical knowledge and applied skills, facilitating a smoother transition into professional practice.

Finally, enhancing the efficiency of social service resource utilization is essential. Establishing a scientific cost-benefit evaluation framework allows organizations to optimize service delivery, allocate resources effectively, and maximize the social impact of limited funding. This approach ensures that resource investments generate sustainable community benefits, enabling social work services to evolve from short-term project operations to long-term, institutionally supported mechanisms that consistently address community needs and improve quality of life.

6. Conclusion

The ongoing reform of the social management system presents a significant opportunity for the advancement of social work, yet its successful implementation relies on careful strategic planning and sustained practical exploration. The future development of social work must be fully integrated into the broader process of modernizing national governance systems and enhancing governance capacities. This integration requires breakthroughs across multiple dimensions, including interdepartmental policy coordination, deep-rooted community engagement, and the strategic application of technology to support efficient and responsive service delivery.

Professional social work forces should actively respond to the evolving and genuine needs arising from social changes, transforming external policy directives into internally sustained drivers of development. By doing so, social work can move beyond a reactive role, becoming a proactive contributor to community resilience and social governance innovation.

Furthermore, social work should be firmly grounded in the local social and cultural context, leveraging community resources and traditional practices to design service models that are both effective and sustainable. The integration of professional expertise with community knowledge can help create service approaches that are adaptive, contextually relevant, and capable of addressing complex social challenges.

Ultimately, social work has the potential to cultivate innovative service models that are stronger, more effective, and capable of delivering measurable social impact. By embedding itself within the fabric of contemporary society, professional social work can contribute its unique and invaluable expertise to foster a new pattern of social governance characterized by co-construction, collaborative management, and shared benefits. In doing so, social work not only enhances the quality of community services but also strengthens the overall capacity for participatory, inclusive, and sustainable governance.

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